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The Battle of Guilford Court House

And the Preservation of That Historic Field

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In pursuance of the determination of the British Government, in 1779, to transfer the seat of active hostilities from the Northern to the Southern Department, Sir Henry Clinton, Cammander-in-Chief of the English forces in America, sailed Southward from New York, invested Charleston, S. C., and in May, 1780, captured the city with practically the whole Southern Army, then under General Lincoln. The British plan of the campaign was to capture South and North Carolina and if possible, Virgina, and hold these at least, as time and the fortunes of war in the future might dictate. Charleston having fallen, Clinton sailed in June for New York and left Lord Cornwallis supplied with all they deemed necessary for the completion of the work. In August, 1780, Cornwallis gained at Camden, S. C., an overwhelming victory over General Gates, leaving the department destitute of troops, except 700 beaten veterans and the militia of North Carolina and Virginia, yet to be raised. The late General Henry V. Boynton, in an address delivered at Guilford Battle Ground on July 4, 1900, says:

"The enemy was resting along the southern border of this State, awaiting the ripening of the crop to advance and subdue it. North Carolina had only her militia with which to resist invasion. Along her southern border the sky was black as midnight in a tropical storm. Did North Carolina falter? Let King's Mountain answer, let Cowpens testify, let Guilford Battle Field respond."

The heroism of the actors in the Battle of King's Mountain is unsurpassed in the annals of militia in the time of war. The moral effect of the battle was immense. It quelled the Tory spirit of the country and inspired the dejected Whigs. It was, however, a battle between militia, brave and heroic as they were, and its material advantage to the country was small. Colonel Furgeson was, I believe, the only Briton on the field, accompanied by 150 to 200 New York provincials, who were regulars, and the remainder of his force, about a thousand men, consisted of Tories. King's Mountain was fought October 7, 1780. Even the battle of Cowpens, fought January 17, 1781, in which 600 of the finest of English Regulars were

killed or captured, seemed only to have aroused Cornwallis to the proper prosecution of the original and all-important plan of the campaign. He at once drove Greene from Charlotte 200 miles across the State of North Carolina, and across the Dan River into Virginia, with fierce and determined activity. Greene, unable to meet him at the time, effected his escape at Irwin's and Boyd's Mills, seventy miles east of Guilford Court House, on the 15th of February, 1781. Cornwallis reached the southern bank of the stream on the same day. Unable to cross, Cornwallis fell back to Hillsboro, N. C., fifty miles southward, remained there till the 26th, and then marched westward to Guilford county, reported to contain much food and provender for the support of an army. Having thrown cavalry and light infantry across the river previously, Greene re-crossed with his command into North Carolina on the 23d and, holding this between the British army and the river, proceeded westward a little north of, and in the rear of Cornwallis. Having been out-generaled by Greene in the recent long retreat, Cornwallis deliberately awaited Greene's choice of time and place for the battle which both knew must come off. Greene, having received expected reinforcements, advanced to Guilford Court House on the 14th of March, 1781. On the 15th occurred the battle of Guilford Court House. This was fought by the generals in command of the respective forces—British and American—numbering at the least ten thousand men, and including the flower of the British army in America. The result of this battle was the immediate and utter abandonment by the British general of the original purpose of the campaign, to-wit: the subjugation of South and North Carolina and Virginia; and the restoration by General Greene to the Union of South Carolina and Georgia, both of which had been over-run and garrisoned. From Guilford Court House, Cornwallis sought safety under the guns of his ships at Wilmington and the British historian, Tarleton, says: Though urged to come out of his defences at Wilmington and again engage Greene, alleging that Greene might entangle him among the rivers of South Carolina and destroy his command, Cornwallis deliberately allowed Greene to pass him, marching southward, unopposed—to destroy in detail his out-

post and garrisons in South Carolina and restore that State and Georgia to the Union. In April, Cornwallis, unopposed, marched northward across North Carolina into Virginia. Here he was unable to effect, or at least to carry out another plan of co-operation with Clinton, and Yorktown followed. The seeds of the surrender at Yorktown and of the bitter quarrel between Cornwallis and Clinton soon following, were sown chiefly at Guilford Court House. These are the fruits of the Battle of Guilford Court House. The one fact that Greene fell back eighteen miles northward to a fortified camp and left Cornwallis in possession of the field on the 15th obscured and for years, continued to obscure the true character of this most important American victory. Greene had written Governor Jefferson that he would deliver battle when his own judgment approved and not before—that he should fight it with militia, preserving his regulars, all he could expect to get and thus drive Cornwallis from North Carolina. All this he did. Stedman, the British historian then present, states that immediately after the withdrawal of Greene's Regulars, his third line, "in good order," Cornwallis ordered a pursuit, which order was speedily countermanded on his better information of the true condition of affairs. There was no pursuit. From a point far south of the battle-field Greene wrote on the 30th the following:

"Greene's Headquarters, Ramsey's,
"Deep River, March 30, 1781.

"I wrote you the 23d instant from Buffalo Creek (South Guilford), since which time we have been in pursuit of the enemy with the determination to bring them into action again. On the 27th we arrived at Ridgen's Ford,——miles above this, and found the enemy then lay at Ramsey's. Our army was put in motion without loss of time, but we found the enemy had crossed some hours before our arrival and with such precipitation that they had left their dead unburied upon the ground."

Tarleton says: "The British obtained information that General Greene's army had reached Buffalo Creek, southward of Guilford Court House. The day before the King's troops arrived at Ramsey's, the Americans insulted the

Yagers in their encampment. The Royalists remained a few days at Ramsey's for the benefit of the wounded and to complete a bridge over Deep River, when the light troops of the Americans again disturbed the pickets. The British crossed the river and the same day General Greene reached Ramsey's with the intention to attack them. The halt of the King's troops at that place nearly occasioned an action which would not probably have been advantageous to the royal forces on account of the position and the disheartening circumstance of their being encumbered with so many wounded officers and men in the action at Guilford."

From Wilmington on the tenth of April Cornwallis wrote Clinton in New York and in a letter, not an official report, that the "victory at Guilford, though one of the bloodiest of the war, was very complete." Greene, he said, never came within reach after the battle nor fired a gun. We would ask Why? If Tarleton and Greene are to be believed and as the relative position of the two armies and their movements prove, it was because Greene could not catch him. Clinton wrote Cornwallis on the thirteenth of April to come to Virginia and bring part of his troops, supposing that Greene had crossed the Roanoke and had fled to Virginia. On the twenty-third, before getting Clinton's letter of the thirteenth, Cornwallis wrote Clinton of his "great apprehension because of Greene's movements to South Carolina" and of his "anxiety" over the situation there; and adds that he is under the necessity of adopting this "hazardous enterprise (of leaving Wilmington for Virginia) at once "hastily and with the appearance of precpitation as I find * * that the return of General Greene, with or without success, would put a junction with Phillips in Virginia out of my power." He had stated to Clinton concerning his deserting to his fate Lord Rawdon at Camden, exposed to Greene, that he had sent Rawdon messages to the effect that Greene was approaching him, and declared his own departure from Cross Creek for Wilmington a necessity. "I could not remain at Wilmington lest Gen. Greene should succeed against Lord Rawdon and by returning to North Carolina, have it in his power to cut off every means of saving my small corps, except that

disgraceful one of an embarkation with the loss of the cavalry and every horse in the army."

That the battle of Guilford was a momentous disaster to Cornwallis and the Brittish cause the criticism of Clinton and reply thereto of Cornwallis establish beyond cavil. (Read Clinton's Narrative and Cornwallis' Reply—1783.)

The Guilford Battle Ground Company is an association of patriotic gentlemen, incorporated and chartered by the Legislature of North Carolina in 1887. Its purpose is "The preservation, reclamation and adornment of the Battle Field of Guilford Court House." Such was the progress made by individual efforts and subscriptions from $1.00 upwards, the State Legislature now and for some years past, has exempted the Association from taxation and makes it an annual approprirtion of several hundred dollars.

The Association owes not one dollar. The beautiful park itself contains about one hundred acres of Piedmont hill and vale, fairly improved and adorned as to its groves and meadows and abundant waters with canopied founts, dams, grass plots, buildings, museum and twenty-five monuments, many with elegant bronze tablets and four crowned with statuary. The title to these grounds has been examined, approved, paid for and the deeds recorded. It lies in the direct line of travel from New York to New Orleans and is traversed by the great Southern Railway. It is imbedded in the hearts of North Carolinians, and citizens of other States, many, many of whose progenities fought here. It is fostered by the State's Legislature, by individuals and by the several railroads centering here to the full extent allowed by law. The thrifty and rapidly growing City of Greensboro, in whose suburbs it lies, annually affords the country, on July 4th, a grand outing upon the grounds, where the living and dead speakers of the land address the people, and where all are made happier men and better, because wiser, citizens of the republic.

The Fayetteville (N. C.) Observer, a journal of the highest respectability, recently published in its columns the following:

"The story of this association and its successful work, reads like a romance, when we consider that it has its being

and has done its work in the hitherto barren, historical soil of North Carolina."

On January 4, 1905, the Hon, Hugh Hastings, State historian of the State of New York, wrote:

"I feel that you deserve the sympathy and encouragement of all patriots in your efforts, etc."

In the Washington Post of July ....., 1903, we have this language from the pen of General V. Boynton:

"The vast body of the Revolutionary patriots in the North should take notice of this North Carolina work, * * * a field preserved and paid for, with its history collected and preserved on tablets and monuments. Those who have brought it to success are at the sunset of life. It would be in every sense fitting if the National Government should receive this finished work of patriotism (freely tendered) and provide for its future care."

JOSEPH M. MOREHEAD.
President Guilford Battle Ground Company.

Greensboro, N. C., March 5, 1906.

We have no salaried officers; pay no dividends; exact no gate fees; have raised with great labor and expended here forty thousand dollars at least, and now tender freely our property to the National Government.

We ask that our proffer be accepted or that the Senate Bill now before the House to erect a monument to General Greene for $25,000 be adopted. In view of the large amounts voted elsewhere over the land, we think our labors and expenditures considered, we ought not to be cut off with the one thousand dollars previously voted us. A wise and just public policy encourages diligence and liberality in patriotic endeavor.

President Guilford Battle Ground Co.

Greensboro, N. C., June 11, 1906.

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